

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
APPLICATION FOR UNITED STATES LETTERS PATENT

Title:

CONICAL AIR FILTER

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Cross-Reference to Related Application

[0001] This application is a continuation-in-part application of U.S. Patent Application No. 09/916,987, filed on July 27, 2001, now allowed.

Field of the Disclosure

[0002] The subject disclosure generally pertains to air filters and, more particularly, to a fabric filter for use inside an air duct.

Background of the Disclosure

[0003] Fans or blowers are used along with ductwork to circulate air through a room or area of a building. The blower typically draws air from within the room through a return air duct and then forces the air back into the room through a supply air duct. To heat or cool the air, the blower may also force or draw the air across a heat exchanger.

[0004] To help prevent dust from accumulating on the heat exchanger, blower, and ductwork, often a conventional filter is installed at the downstream end of the return air duct. Finer, less porous filters are used where dust removal is more critical, such as in so called clean rooms or in buildings having occupants with dust-related allergies. Unfortunately, fine filters usually create a higher pressure drop that reduces the amount of airflow. To minimize the pressure drop, an effective cross-sectional area of the filter can be increased in various ways, such as by adding pleats to the filter, installing the filter at an angle relative to the duct, or by forming the filter as an elongated bag that extends lengthwise into an air duct.

[0005] Some examples of filters that are elongated along the direction of airflow are disclosed in U. S. Patents 2,853,154; 3,151,962; 3,195,296; 3,204,391; 3,204,392; 3,396,517; and 3,538,686. When mounting such filters within a return air duct, upstream of the blower, a significant distance is needed between the blower and where the filter attaches to the duct, simply due to the length of the filter. In many cases, this can be difficult or impossible to do, because of bends or elbows in the ductwork. Also, much of the ductwork is usually inaccessible, as it is often installed within the walls of the building or between the floor and ceiling. Filters in a return air duct are therefore typically installed immediately adjacent the blower, which may prohibit the use of an elongated filter or at least significantly limit its length.

[0006] On the other hand, if an elongated air filter were installed in the supply air duct, the filter would do little in preventing dust from accumulating on the blower and the heat exchanger, because dust often originates in the room. With a filter installed in the supply air duct, dust from the room could pass across the blower and heat exchanger before ever reaching the filter.

[0007] Moreover, if elongated filters of current designs were installed within a generally cylindrical duct having a pliable fabric wall, the non-conical shape of the filter may cause the fabric of the duct to flutter, due to uneven patterns of airflow velocity. If the cross-sectional area of airflow between the exterior of an elongated filter and the interior of the cylindrical fabric duct is not circumferentially uniform, as could be the case with a flat-sided filter within a cylindrical duct, localized areas of higher velocity may exist. Also, abrupt changes in velocity along the length of a fabric duct may also cause the fabric to flutter.

Summary of the Disclosure

[0008] In some embodiments, an air duct system includes a conical filter disposed within a cylindrical duct.

[0009] In some embodiments, an air duct system includes an inflatable conical filter with pleats.

[0010] In some embodiments, the pleats are interconnected in an alternating pattern of connection points to inhibit the filter from billowing excessively outward.

[0011] In some embodiments, an air duct system includes a blower and a heat exchanger interposed between an upstream pre-filter and a downstream conical filter, which is less porous.

[0012] In some embodiments, an inflatable fabric filter is disposed within an inflatable fabric air duct.

[0013] In some embodiments, the fabric wall of the air duct is air permeable.

[0014] In some embodiments, the integrity of a fabric air duct can be maintained regardless of whether the elongated filter is attached to the duct.

[0015] In some embodiments, a zipper removably attaches an elongated filter to a fabric air duct.

[0016] In some embodiments, a plurality of conical filters have the same length to diameter ratio even though the filters are of different diameters for various diameter air ducts.

[0017] In some embodiments, a releasable circumferential connector removably attaches the elongated filter to the fabric air duct and is manufactured from extruded plastic pieces having interlocking ridges.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0018] Figure 1 is a cutaway view of an air duct system with a fabric air duct and a conical fabric filter.

[0019] Figure 2 is a cutaway view of an air duct system with a relatively rigid air duct and a conical fabric filter.

[0020] Figure 3 is similar to Figure 1, but with the fabric duct and filter deflated.

[0021] Figure 4 is a perspective view of the filter used in the air duct system of Figure 1.

[0022] Figure 5 is a closer up view of the supply air duct and conical filter of Figure 1.

[0023] Figure 6 is similar to Figure 5, but with the filter removed and two sections of the supply air duct zipped together.

[0024] Figure 7 is similar to Figure 4, but showing a fabric conical filter that is pleated.

[0025] Figure 8 is a cross-sectional view taken along line 8-8 of Figure 7.

[0026] Figure 9 shows one of a plurality of conical air filters.

[0027] Figure 10 is similar to Figure 9, but showing a larger filter with the same length to diameter ratio.

[0028] Figure 11 is a side view of a supply air duct and conical filter depicting an alternative form of releasable circumferential connector.

[0029] Figure 12 is a sectional view of the releasable circumferential connector of Figure 11, taken along line 12-12 of Figure 11.

Description of the Preferred Embodiment

[0030] An air handling system 10 of Figure 1 is used to heat or cool an area 12 of a building 14. To do this, system 10 includes a blower 16; a heat exchanger 18; a pre-filter 20; a finer, less porous inflatable filter 22; a supply air duct 24; and a return air duct 26. Heat exchanger 18 is schematically illustrated to represent any device for heating or cooling air, such as by electrical resistance or by heat transfer with another fluid, such as refrigerant, water, or glycol. A housing 28 can enclose one or more of the components of system 10.

[0031] In operation, blower 16 draws air 30 from area 12, through return air duct 26 and across pre-filter 20, with pre-filter 20 being any conventional filter known to those skilled in the art. Pre-filter 20 can be used to capture the larger dust particles in the air that might otherwise accumulate on heat exchanger 18 and blower 16. Pre-filter 20 also helps prevent large dust particles from quickly plugging up the less porous filter 22 in supply air duct 24.

[0032] After the air passes through pre-filter 20, blower 16 draws the air across heat exchanger 18. Blower 16 then discharges the air through inflatable filter 22, through supply air duct 24, and into area 12 through the pores or other openings in supply duct 24. Filter 22, being relatively fine, can be used to remove smaller dust particles that were able to pass through pre-filter 20. In some embodiments, the fabric material of filter 22 is provided by 3M of St. Paul, Minnesota, and has a standard

particle removal efficiency of 80 to 90%, at 150 to 300 cfm/ft², with a static pressure drop of .2 inches of water.

[0033] Conical fabric filters, such as filter 22, can be installed within various types of ducts. The supply air duct can be made of sheet metal or some other relatively rigid material, as is the case of conical filter 22' in supply air duct 32 of Figure 2, or can be made of a pliable fabric 34, as is the case of duct 24. With a metal air duct, air registers 36 provide one or more openings for air to discharge into area 12. As an alternative or in addition to registers 36, the fabric of air duct 24 may be air-permeable and/or be provided with cutouts or discharge openings 38 that deliver air to area 12. Examples of fabric air duct 24 are disclosed in U. S. Patent Nos. 5,655,963 and 5,769,708, which are specifically incorporated by reference herein.

[0034] In the example of Figure 1, the fabric wall of duct 24 has a generally cylindrical or tubular shape when inflated by the discharge pressure of blower 16. However, when the heating or cooling demand of area 12 has been satisfied, blower 16 may turn off, which deflates filter 22 and leaves the fabric walls of duct 24 hanging relatively limp, as shown in Figure 3. Some fabric air ducts have a rigid frame that helps hold the fabric walls of the duct in a generally tubular shape even when the blower is not running. Such frame-supported ducts are also well within the scope of the disclosure.

[0035] Filter 22 can be installed within an air duct (metal or fabric, supply or return) in various ways. In a currently preferred embodiment, a collar 40, made of fabric or some other material, couples filter 22 to a first segment 24a and a second segment 24b of fabric air duct 24. Referring further to Figure 4, fabric rim 42 at a base 44 of filter 22 is sewn or otherwise attached to the interior of collar 40. Collar 40 includes two half-zippers 46 and 48 that removably interlock with mating half-

zippers 50 and 52 on supply air duct 24, as shown in Figure 5. Half-zippers 46 and 50 comprise a first zipper 54, and half-zippers 48 and 52 comprise a second zipper 56. Zippers 54 and 56 allow filter 22 to be temporarily removed from duct 24 for filter cleaning or replacement. If filter 22 is removed for an extended period, half-zippers 50 and 52 may be zipped together to re-establish a continuous supply air duct, as shown in Figure 6.

[0036] To minimize the pressure drop created by filter 22 and to extend the period between filter cleanings, filter 22 is elongated to provide a large surface area through which the air may pass. This is accomplished by having filter 22, when inflated, be of a generally conical shape (i.e., most of its contour or outer envelope fits the shape of a cone). In some embodiments, filter 22 is in the shape of a cone (i.e., substantially all of its contour or outer envelope fits that of a cone).

[0037] To help prevent the fabric walls of duct 24b from fluttering, the velocity and flow direction of the air between the exterior of filter 22 and the interior of duct 24b is kept as smooth as reasonably possible. This can be achieved by installing a conical filter within a cylindrical duct to create an airflow path whose annular cross-sectional area increases gradually from an upstream to a downstream end of filter 22.

[0038] To provide a conical filter with more surface area, a filter 58 can have a pleated fabric wall, as shown in Figures 7 and 8. The pleats run generally lengthwise with each pleat being connected to its two adjacent pleats in an alternating pattern of discrete points. For example, a central pleat 60 lies between a first pleat 62 and a second pleat 64. Central pleat 60 has a central peak 60' that zigzags between an adjacent first peak 62' and a second peak 64' of pleats 62 and 64, respectively. Central peak 60' is attached to first peak 62' at points 66, 68 and 70. Central peak 60'

is also attached to second peak 64' at points 72, 74 and 76. The alternating pattern of connection points inhibits the blower's discharge air pressure from flattening the pleats and restrains filter 58 to a generally conical shape.

[0039] To provide a plurality of conical filters that provide the same flow rate for a given area of filter material regardless of the duct's diameter, each filter's length to diameter ratio is the same. For example, in Figure 9, a filter 78 in a first duct 80 has a diameter 82 of 24 inches, as measured along a base 84 of conical filter 78, and has a length 94 of 120 inches, as measured from a center 86 of base 84 to an apex 88 of filter 78. Similarly, in Figure 10, a filter 90 in a larger duct 92 has a diameter 96 of 48 inches and a length 98 of 240 inches, whereby both filters 78 and 90 have a length to diameter ratio of five ($120/24 = 5$, and $240/48 = 5$).

[0040] In an alternative embodiment, depicted in Figure 11, the filter 22 may be coupled to the air duct 24 using releasable circumferential connectors provided in a form different from the conventional metal zippers 46, 48, 50, 52. The first releasable circumferential connector 100 may extend from the collar 40 to connect the filter 22 to the first segment (not shown) of the air duct 24, while the second releasable circumferential connector 102 may also extend from the collar 40 and be used to connect the second segment 24b to the filter 22. As used herein, "releasable circumferential connector" is understood to mean any type of fastener extending substantially around the entire circumference of the duct 24 and which may be readily pulled apart by a user either with or without the use of a slide as used in a zipper or the like. Frictional engagement of interlocking protrusions as described below holds such a releasable circumferential connector together.

[0041] The cross-sectional view depicted in Figure 12 shows the releasable circumferential connector 102 as having interlocking strips 103 and 104, while

releasable circumferential connector 100 is shown having a strip 106 adapted to interlock with a strip (not shown) provided on the first segment of the air duct. Each strip 103, 104, and 106 includes a base 108 from which protrusions 110 extend. Each protrusion 110 includes a stem 112 and a head 114, the head 114 being wider than the stem 112, thereby creating a shoulder 116. Each protrusion 110 is separated by a void 118. Any number of protrusions 110 can be provided, including two or four, with a corresponding number of voids 118 being created therebetween.

[0042] By providing such structure, the strips 103, 104, and 106 can be connected by orienting them in opposing fashion, and applying compressive force, as with a thumb and forefinger, for example. In so doing, it can be seen that the protrusions 110 of the strip 103 extend into the voids 118 of the other strip 104 with each head 114 interlocking against one of the shoulders 116 of the opposing strip. The compressive force causes the protrusions 110 to laterally deflect to a degree sufficient to allow for entry of the opposing protrusions 106. Manufacturing the strips 103, 104, and 106 from a resilient material facilitates such movement, with polypropylene being one suitable example material. More specifically, the resilience of the material enables one strip to be stretched sufficiently to overlies the other, whereupon the two can be compressed together.

[0043] Although the invention is described with reference to a preferred embodiment, it should be appreciated by those skilled in the art that various modifications are well within the scope of the invention. Therefore, the scope of the invention is to be determined by reference to the claims that follow.